

# CELL GROUPS A Key to Parish Renewal?

Fr Michael Hurley

**Fr Michael Hurley, who has been a leader in the Catholic Charismatic Renewal in Ireland for many years, shares his experiences of organising cell groups in one of his former parishes and the effect that this had on church life and faith.**

My first contact with parish cell groups was in 1989. I attended a seminar on evangelisation in Rome. It included a ten minute input by a participant from a cell group in Milan. Though spoken in broken English, it communicated a sense of vision. It excited me. I could see that here was something I had only dreamt about, namely, the possibility of the parish I belonged to becoming a community of communities. It prompted me to envisage small faith groups in the homes of people, which would engage them in the mystery of God and motivate them to share their faith stories, when appropriate, with those whom they met. I could see its immense possibilities and that through multiplication, increasing circles of people could be involved. It called every person to evangelisation.

## Do I have the resources to see it through?

This also troubled me. Fears and questions screamed to the surface. Where might I begin? Did I have the resources to see it through? Would people be disillusioned if cell groups were launched but petered out after a few years? Where could I get the time? Yet the vision remained. I shared what I had heard with friends. Seven months later, during Lent, we gathered 48 people together through personal invitations, church announcements and notice boards, for a short interactive course on the basics of Christian faith. It included prayerful reflection. On the final night most participants wished to be involved in house faith groups. At the same time four of us attended a European workshop on cell groups in Milan. This helped increase our confidence. We adapted what we heard to an Irish setting. Two years later 31 groups were meeting every two weeks within the parish.

## What are cell groups?

Cell groups are small faith groups of between four and twelve people who meet each fortnight in the homes of a participant. The elements comprise a few hymns and an opening prayer, reflection on a scriptural passage, sharing about where one may have seen God's influence since the previous meeting, a brief talk explaining an aspect of faith, (often on tape when a number of groups exist in the same parish), appropriation, through discussion, of what is heard, and prayers of intercession and healing. These elements are designed to encourage people to reflect upon what faith means to them in the daily encounters and events of life and help them see its implications within the context of home, neighbourhood, work, recreation and parish. In this way people usually come to a deeper and more personal sense of God present with them. Cell groups differ from most faith groups in that they are committed to a culture of evangelisation, helping and forming individuals to share faith with others.

## How can we form people to live their Christian faith with confidence in the contemporary culture?

I observe a vast chasm in the Irish pastoral scene. We have beautiful liturgies, music, prayers, well run schools, and parishes with many initiatives, yet, our good news message is largely not getting out. I see this gap focused on two important areas. Firstly, as churches we seem to possess very limited ability to facilitate a deepening of faith and conversion of life. In fact, the dramatic decline in church attendance, generally interpreted as walking away from the institution, though not from faith, shows that this expression of faith has little resonance in the hearts of those attending. Secondly, we seem to have minimal ability to form and inform people to live their Christian faith with confidence in contemporary culture. This is shown by a diffidence in declaring faith

and uncertainty about basic concepts and practices, by many.

In this there is pain for priests and for lay faithful, who have given their best energies (and their prayer) to a Church which now appears to be disappearing from their grasp. Frustration easily becomes the lot of the idealistic. Is there a way out? Is there a great master plan? Pope John Paul II reflects upon these questions in *Novo Millennio Ineunte*. The programme already exists, he says. It has "its centre in Christ himself, who is to be known, loved and imitated so that in him we may live the life of the Trinity and with him transform history". This then, he adds, must be translated by the local church "into pastoral initiatives adapted to the circumstances of each community". In Ireland, an increasing number of parishes, which differ greatly in culture and history, support cell groups as part of their initiative and pastoral planning.

### Cell groups help people to feel they too are Church

In thirteen years I have seen the impact of cell groups upon individuals. A richer relationship with God leads to deeper happiness and a greater sense of participation in the arena of Christian faith. Cell groups make practical a basic tenet: You too are the Church. Participants are helped to share faith in their own homes, streets, schools and places of recreation. A cell slogan is "you don't need to go to evangelise, you evangelise as you go". I believe this emphasis upon evangelisation, which is practical, tangible, and within the reach of all, attracts people.

Cell groups greatly impact parish life. Those who participate are more likely to become involved in parish ministries. The birth of a more personal faith, community, quality of service, and spirit of evangelisation, learned within the group, lead people to appreciate more the faith aspect of a parish and more likely to serve within it.

### Priorities of time are challenged

Firstly, priorities of time are challenged. In a busy lifestyle it becomes a question of whether one continues responding to the immediate or

seeks to provide opportunities where people experience a conversion of life and a call to evangelise. Secondly, faith, as a private preserve, is confronted. Susan Blum claims that as few as 2% of Catholics have a genuinely evangelistic attitude. Faith now becomes a gift to be shared. All believers are called to evangelise. We no longer behave as belonging to a secret society, holding from others the secrets of our dynamism and life.

Thirdly, the threat of change in one's relationships and of being seen is real. There is the risk of misunderstanding. An emphasis upon control yields to working more collaboratively with others.

### Importance of right timing for launch of cell groups

The launch of cell groups are always felt as a challenge. Reflection on local pastoral opportunities and needs provide the best guide for their fruitful timing. Cell groups can be an ideal follow up to a parish mission, novena of grace, or other spiritual event, which too often remain simply as nice memories rather than launching pads to build upon. On the other hand it may be necessary, over a number of years, to prepare the ground, where, for example, there has been little exposure to spiritual events and when a priest is new to a parish. Preparation may include communicating a sense of God through a variety of ways (e.g. lectio divina. Life in the Spirit Seminars, days of reflection), training people as evangelists, and seeking help from other cell groups.

### Cell groups help a parish to evangelise

At a meeting of cell leaders in Callan, Co. Kilkenny, last November, priests stressed the value of friendship with, and support from, lay people in parish evangelisation. They agreed that cells help a parish be what it should be about, namely evangelisation, where faith is deepened and where explorers hear stories of living faith and begin sharing their own stories.

Cell groups are an option for anyone who wishes to share their faith story, who seeks a strategy of formation for parishioners, and who desires to localise the church. They are, I

believe, making a contribution to a future, where faith is interactive and explicit, and helping build bridges between culture and everyday life. "The church of the future will be

one built from below by basic communities" (Karl Rahner). Cell groups enshrine an exciting vision.

*PS: "Transforming Your Parish" (Michael Hurley, Columba Press, Dublin, 1998) provides very useful and practical help towards the formation of cell groups available from Goodnews Books, 15 Barking Close, Luton 9HG price £5.99 plus £1.25 p&p.*

From: the Goodnews archives, May/June 2004, <http://www.ccr.org.uk/archive/gn0405/g011.htm>

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More:

0322uk on [www.stucom.nl](http://www.stucom.nl): Parish Renewal Through Cell Groups by Michelle Harrison

Goodnews archives, May/June 2004, <http://www.ccr.org.uk/archive/gn0405/g011.htm>

International site of parish evangelization cell system <http://www.cells-evangelization.org/>

Nederlands: [www.stucom.nl/parochie](http://www.stucom.nl/parochie), document 0220, 0302 en andere.

Deutsch: 0216de, 0217de auf [www.stucom.nl](http://www.stucom.nl).

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